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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION HUNGER STRIKE: POSSIBLE SOLUTION IN
WORKS?

REF: TUNIS 1294

Classified By: CDA Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) held a press conference on October 19 to mark their hunger strike's first month. Though the conference had been planned for days, the topic du jour was two articles that appeared in the October 19 editions of the private (but GOT influenced) Arabic-daily Ash-Shourouq and French-daily Le Quotidien, which reported that the PDP's landlord had been summoned to the Presidency regarding a resolution. Barring a concrete overture, the PDP plans to continue the hunger strike, and will hold a press conference with Helene Flautre, President of the European Parliament's Sub-Commission for Human Rights, on October 20. The last day the PDP can legally remain in their current location is October 23, and the PDP plans to hold a sit-in. End Summary.

Health Update

¶2. (C) PolOff met with opposition Progressive Democratic Party hunger strikers (Secretary General Maya Jribi and former Secretary General Nejib Chebbi) on October 17. Although extremely thin, both Maya Jribi and Nejib Chebbi were walking around and could speak without difficulty. According to their doctor, Jribi's overall condition and Chebbi's pre-existing heart condition are of concern. Jribi told PolOff that she and Chebbi were really beginning to feel the effects of the hunger strike, which began on September 20, but both hunger strikers are adamant they will continue.

A New Home or An Old One?

¶3. (C) Chebbi and Jribi said that although they had been in talks with another landlord about a new location, when they went to sign the papers with the new landlord and his attorney, neither showed. The PDP was not given a reason for their absence, and have not heard anything from the potential landlord since. The last day the PDP can legally stay in its current building is October 23. Despite not having a new location, they did say that if they are evicted from their current location, they have another location in mind from which they will continue the hunger strike.

¶4. (C) If the private (but GOT influenced) Arabic-daily

Ash-Shourouq and French-daily Le Quotidien are to be believed, however, it may not be necessary for the PDP to find a new headquarters. Both papers reported on October 19 that the Presidency had summoned the PDP's landlord to the Presidency to prompt a resolution. (Note: Le Quotidien and Ash Shourouq are "sister" papers, and their articles are near verbatim translations. End Note.) The papers reported that the landlord regretted that a private matter had been politicized, and that he originally filed the eviction notice because neighbors complained about noise.

15. (C) Before their October 19 press conference, Chebbi and Jribi told diplomats from the US, French, German, Finnish, and Dutch Embassies that they surmised the articles could mean one of two things. Chebbi opined that the articles could be the GOT's way of gauging public and international opinion about the hunger strike, and based on the reaction the GOT will decide next steps. The other possibility is that the articles are the GOT's way of broaching a resolution without admitting that the PDP's multiple and near simultaneous evection proceedings (Ref A) are politically motivated. Chebbi said publicly during the October 19 press conference that the PDP is open to a solution that allows the PDP to remain in its headquarters, even if that means paying a "penalty" or increased rent. Should the PDP and its landlord reach such a resolution, both Jribi and Chebbi said that they would end the hunger strike, though they stressed that to date, neither the landlord nor a GOT representative has contacted them about a compromise. Barring a concrete overture, however, the two declared their resolution to continue the hunger strike.

International Support

16. (C) During the October 19 press conference, Jribi also denounced the ongoing harassment of younger members of the PDP, who they say are arbitrarily detained and harassed by police. Jribi announced that the PDP will hold a joint press conference with Helene Flautre, President of the European Parliament's Sub-Commission for Human Rights on October 20. Ms. Flautre has already sent an open letter to President Ben Ali calling on him to address the PDP's grievances. A group of Canadian political parties and civil society groups have also written a letter in support of the PDP, as have groups in France. In Tunisia, there is a committee for the support of the hunger strikers, and opposition Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) opposition party leader Mustapha Ben Jaafer attended the PDP press conference, despite publicly saying that he did not agree with the hunger strikers, methods. Ben Jaafer told Pol/EconCons separately that while he supports the hunger strikers intent, he feels that their methods are drastic and fears that they have painted themselves in to a corner.

Comment

17. (C) The EU Ambassadors, prompted by France, sent a private letter to FM Abdallah expressing concern for the hunger strikers' health on October 11. During an Oct. 17 lunch with them, Foreign Minister Abdallah reportedly said three times that the PDP issue is a private affair between a landlord and his tenants, and that it was not for the GOT to intervene. His denials, while totally lacking in credibility, mesh with the implication underlying the Ash-Shourouq and Le Quotidien articles that the government wishes to prompt a resolution as if it were an uninterested party. Post believes that there are competing factions within the GOT that differ on how to approach this issue. For the moment, those favoring a compromise solution seem to have gained ground. We believe that a deal between the landlord and the PDP represents the best possible solution, and we have suggested as much to the hunger strikers, whose health continues to deteriorate. A physical confrontation

between police and the PDP if the PDP is evicted would generate harsh international criticism in advance of the 20th anniversary of President Ben Ali's ascension to the presidency, something the GOT would presumably like to avoid.

End Comment.

DESJARDINS